ETHAN'S FIRST WEEK

How is he doing?

BY ALBA PRATALIA

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How is he doing?

So, enter: Nathan. Let's see how he does in his first narrative assignment.

Ethan lifted his glass—not to drink, just to give it a little swirl, like he was checking if the whisky had any gossip to offer. It didn't. It was as blank as he felt, which is why he was on either his second or his eighth. Numbers had stopped consenting to be counted an hour ago.

The door creaked the way doors do when they want attention, and in came a man with the sort of gait that whispered, *I have a backstory you won't like.* Ethan clocked it instantly. Not paranoia—just that veteran sixth sense that life has trained into him like a badly paid internship.

The guy walked with a suspicious talk. You know the type: every step says *I'm about to say something cringe,* every gesture is pre-lubricated with self-importance. His aura was basically a podcast no one wants to be a guest on.

Then the man put a cap on. Not just any cap, no. The cap. Navy-blue acrylic, embroidery bright enough to cause retinal trauma: a military ship silhouette, bold yellow letters arcing proudly, two little laurel leaves like someone had stapled victory to a lie.

Ethan, mid-sip, paused. "Oh here we go," he thought—or maybe said out loud. Hard to tell.

The barman, whose emotional range spanned from Mildly Tired to Mildly Tired But Polite, perked up.

"Oh, thank you for your service, sir. First drink's on the house."

Ethan's eyebrows did a slow, sarcastic climb toward orbit. Because of course. Of course the guy bought himself a pre-fabricated thank-you.

The man touched the brim of his heroic hat like a low-budget general. "Much obliged," he muttered, performing gratitude like a badly rehearsed school play.

Ethan sighed into his glass. Terrible omen. Hat Guy was the sort who'd eventually sidle closer and start a conversation. The universe loved pushing these types toward Ethan, like cosmic matchmaking but meaner.

Sure enough, Hat Guy turned, scanned the bar, and locked onto Ethan like a Roomba spotting a wall to crash into.

Ethan whispered to his drink, "I really should stop going outside."

The waitresses chimed in—two of them, synchronized like malfunctioning Teletubbies at a cult meeting.

"Thank you for your service!"
"Thank you for your service!"

Their smiles were wide, empty, and aggressively laminated. Ethan felt his soul do a backflip out of disgust.

He pivoted on the stool, whisky sloshing dangerously—fine, theatrically. He'd earned theatrics.

"Oh **fuck** your service," he announced, like he was delivering a toast at the world's worst wedding.

The waitresses froze. Hat Guy blinked. The barman whispered something to a lime wedge.

Ethan held up a finger—professorial, except drunk and irritated.

"Fuck *you.*
Fuck your **free drink.**
Fuck that little bathtub you drew on your cap—whatever ship that's supposed to be, looks like something toddlers sail in a pool."

Hat Guy's mouth opened to protest but Ethan was rolling now, a downhill bowling ball made of grievance.

"And fuck the whole idea of the military, you bunch of bargain-bin Spartans. Thank **me** for my service. Yeah, you heard me."

He jabbed himself in the chest. The whisky trembled in his other hand like it wanted no part of this.

"Thank *me* and people like me who've been screaming peace since the moment our brains sprouted a working neuron.
Thank *me* for trying to keep you from killing or

getting killed while you LARP glory in embroidered polyester."

Silence. The bar was a vacuum chamber.

Ethan leaned in, voice dry as a desert argument.

"You're all a pack of war-addicted, flag-sniffing disaster-hobbyists. Every last one. Congratulations."

Hat Guy looked like he was about to say something heroic. Ethan prayed he wouldn't—mostly because he didn't want to hear another syllable from that cap.

And then, very softly, he added to his drink:

"See? This is what happens when you draw me into society."

The barman marched over with the solemnity of a man delivering a eulogy for a goldfish. He plucked Ethan's glass away mid-orbit, like confiscating

contraband from a child who wasn't even playing with it properly.

"We respect the forces here," he declared, puffing up like a patriotic pufferfish. "And we reserve the right to refuse service to those who don't."

Ethan rose from the stool, hands lifted skyward as if surrendering to stupidity itself.

"Well," he announced, "guess who's glad **not** to be a patron of this fascist establishment!"

A couple of customers gasped. One dropped a fork. Hat Guy clutched his heroic bathtub-cap like it was the last cupcake at a toddler's birthday party.

Ethan strutted toward the door, indignation oozing out of him like steam escaping a busted kettle. Every footstep was a protest. Every breath was a subpoena. He didn't walk out—he evacuated himself from the premises.

The door swung shut behind him with that satisfying *you-are-henceforth-banished* thump.

Two steps down the curb, he shoved his hands in his pockets.

And grinned.

"Guess who skipped another bar tab," he whispered to the night, proud as sin, smug as a cat that just stole a chicken leg and blamed the dog.

He kept walking, pockets full of unpaid whisky and zero regrets. The universe, for once, applauded with a breeze.

It wasn't his first tab-free exit, and the universe knew damn well it wouldn't be the last. Ethan had it down to an art form: bartender refuses to keep serving "the hater," Ethan walks out with his moral superiority flapping behind him like a badly folded cape… and the bill evaporates into the ether. Classic.

He had a whole portfolio of greatest hits.

There'd been the time he unloaded on the Orthodox Jewish guy in full Hasidic regalia—peyots bouncing like accusatory springs—calling him a murderer, a genocide cheerleader for the crimes in Palestine. Ethan did it calmly, clinically, like diagnosing a virus. The man had fled. Ethan's tab had stayed behind. Nobody dared ask him to pay it.

Then the Catholic priest. Ethan had barely let the man finish blessing his soup before he jabbed a finger and said, "Yeah yeah, Father, save it—how many kids have you failed to save? Or touched? Or covered for? Huh?"
The priest evaporated like incense. The barman took Ethan's drink away. Ethan strolled out, tab-free and humming.

The hipster? Oh, that one was easy. Ethan had roasted him for being a "fucking artisanal cocksucker hipster," which—admittedly—wasn't even about geopolitics or ethics; that was just pure

aesthetic revulsion. Man-bun, suspenders, IPA-musk. Reflex reaction. They kicked Ethan out.
Ethan skipped the tab. Nature healed.

And then, of course, the pièce de résistance: the MAGA hat guy, the American exceptionalist onion with layers of rage and cholesterol.
Ethan had sat *on purpose* next to him.
Had *on purpose* discussed the structural integrity of border walls.
Had *on purpose* compared rifle calibers like a man listing wines.

The guy loved him. Bought every single one of Ethan's drinks. Called him "brother."
Ethan, feeling both victorious and vaguely dirty, had nodded along until he felt the urge to shower.

Two birds. One stone. Every time.

✓ Venting his pure, unfiltered, unpasteurized disdain at whatever group symbolically represented

the day's moral dysentery.
✓ Free drinks.

Ethan was a terrible person, maybe. But also an efficient one. And in the dark little economy of his nights, that counted for something.

Ethan had even had a **sequel** to one of his priest-rants—like a bonus track nobody asked for.

He'd just finished calling a Catholic padre a "walking child-abuse cover-up in a cassock," got his drink confiscated, and was halfway out the door plotting his next unpaid cocktail when another patron intercepted him.

Big guy. Red face. That **I-lift-tires-for-fun** build. He stepped right into Ethan's path and growled:

"Hey, buddy. I didn't like any of that. I'm a Christian too."

Ethan didn't miss a beat. Not even a hiccup.

“Oh yeah?” he said. “Well **forgive me**, then.”

And he walked out.

Later he admitted—fine, yes—it was straight-up stolen from Bill Hicks.
But some jokes are like emergency fire extinguishers: break glass when necessary, deploy instantly, ask forgiveness never.

And anyway, Ethan always figured if a line is that good, it deserves field work.

Ethan stagger-marched down the sidewalk, still riding the chemical high of righteous fury and fiscal irresponsibility. The night air was cool, crisp, and just smug enough to provoke him.

He pointed at the empty space in front of him—like scolding an invisible intern.

“Now tell me,” he announced to nobody, “who **decided** I’m the ‘lighter’ one?”

He stabbed the air again for emphasis.

"Who decided I'm different from Nathan? Huh? Who made that call? I want names."

A pause. A dramatic tilt of the head. The streetlight flickered, wisely staying out of it.

"I'm supposed to have this—what was it?—this *unmistakable Addendum.*" He wiggled his fingers like conjuring a ghost.
"'A faint aura of *I swear I'm trying this time*.' That's what they say I have."

He snorted, loud enough to scare a pigeon into atheism.

"And Nathan gets *'I will absolutely set fire to this room.'*"

He stopped walking, squared himself to the world like it owed him a duel.

“I will absolutely set fire to the whole **building** just for a laugh,” he informed the universe, deeply offended.
“Who decided I’m less dark-minded?
Who decided I’m some kind of diet sociopath?
A lighter shade of unhinged?
The *decaf* version?”

He scoffed, hands on his hips, the international pose of a man ready to commit light arson.

“Just wait and see,” he muttered, cracking his neck with villainous ambition.

Then, with perfect comedic inevitability, he held an imaginary drink out to the cosmos.

“Here,” he said. “Hold my beer.”

The universe, wisely, did not.

So, dear reader, that wrapped up Ethan's **first official narration assignment**—and he slammed the door behind it with all the grace of a raccoon stealing a baguette.

How did he do, dear reader?

"Chaotic good with a sprinkle of property damage."
Ethan is like a Yelp review that learned how to drink. Unstable but weirdly insightful. Took off one star because I'm pretty sure he owes me a whisky.

"Finally, an honest man."
I've never related to someone skipping bar tabs so aggressively. I laughed, I winced, I questioned my

own moral compass. 10/10 would watch him insult clergy again.

“Too angry, not enough plot.”

This felt like being trapped in a taxi with a furious philosopher who’s also very drunk. I appreciate the passion, but my ears are still ringing.

“Borderline feral. Loved it.”

Ethan radiates the energy of a man who would absolutely steal your lighter while lecturing you on pacifism. A modern hero.

“He yelled at me and I wasn’t even in the story.”

I don’t know why I feel insulted, but I do. I want compensation.

“Would let him ruin my evening again.”

He should come with warning labels and free peanuts.

And like any true performer, Ethan will ignore all criticism and double down.

Stay tuned.

ETHAN'S SECOND

Ethan twirled the glass like it owed him rent. The wine sloshed around with the enthusiasm of a bored saint—so, none—while he leaned back, spine doing that slow-motion protest it always did at the end of a day spent surviving humanity.

He took a sip. Let it sit on his tongue like he was auditioning for "Man Who Pretends to Taste Notes He Can't Actually Taste."

"Mah," he said. "Boh."
The universal syllables of a man who's too tired to hate the universe but still hates its customer service.

Then he looked up—past the bottle, past the rim of the glass, past the dust motes trying their best cosmic-ballet impression—and aimed his voice at the air like it owed him an explanation.

"If you've never been treated like the village idiot by the people who grin like accomplices,

if you've never loathed your own carbon footprint for having the audacity to exist,
if you've never slept exclusively in the company of nightmares—never a good dream, not even a half-assed 'fine, whatever' dream,
if you've never felt physical recoil at the mere requirement of interacting with other upright mammals,
if you've never been scolded for 'social deficiencies' like someone grading your soul's homework,
if you've never felt a migraine of the spirit when every failure you've ever birthed decides to hold a surprise reunion in your skull,
if you've never spoken in public with a pee stain proudly glowing like the world's saddest badge of honor—and stayed fully, painfully aware of it…

then tell me, honestly—
have you ever actually *been*?"

He paused. The wineglass didn't answer. It was busy pretending to be deep.

“Yeah,” Ethan muttered. “That’s what I thought.”

Four bottles in, Ethan’s vowels were melting, consonants slipping off his tongue like they’d unionized and gone on strike. The room had become one of those late-night diners where every object judges you silently, especially the furniture.

He spoke to the void. The void pretended not to know him.

“I’d like to know,” he slurred with ceremonial gravitas, “who says I’m not Nathan. I’d like to see their faces. Their **faces**, void. Show me the roster.”

He paused as if the universe might hand him a clipboard.

“Mah… boh…”
He let the syllables droop out of his mouth like wet laundry.

“You know what they call me?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “A *noble sportsman*. Because I’m not

competitive. Because I always concede the point or the game or the argument or the whole damn battle for my life. 'Sportsman.' Ah, yes. A majestic gazelle." He tapped his chest. "Except I'm more of a limping sloth that smoked three packs inside a coal mine at midnight while losing a race to a dead snail."

He wagged a finger at his invisible audience. "It's not sportsmanship. It's not-bothering-anymore-ship. That's the boat I'm on. The HMS I-Did-My-Time."

He took a long swallow of wine straight from the bottle, skipping the glass as if the glass had betrayed him earlier.

"In **every** competition in my life—every single one—I never won once. The kind where you can lose? I lost. The kind where you technically *can't* lose? I also lost, creatively. The universe said, 'Here's a game where it's literally impossible to lose,' and I said, 'Challenge accepted,' and cratered it."

He leaned back, eyes half-closed, voice thinning into a brittle ribbon.

“So what’s the point in trying? Sure, here, take the point. It was yours anyway. I’ll even toss in the match ball. And the trophy. And the league title. And the naming rights to my self-esteem.”

He sniffed, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Sportsmanship… bitch, please.”

Ethan: “So, Nathan sang the blues, eh?
Cute. Very cute.
Well, pardon my Ella Fitzgerald, listen to *this*.”

He grabbed a mic that absolutely did *not* need to exist in this scene, flicked it on, and the autotune slid in like a smooth criminal wearing velvet gloves.

Ethan inhaled as if preparing to deliver a sermon to a congregation of fed-up saints.

Ain't got a spark in the morning,
Ain't got that hum in my chest,
Ain't got that soft little warming,
I ain't got nothing but the blues.

He lifted one hand dramatically, as though the universe owed him back taxes.

Ain't got a laugh that'll surface,
Ain't got a joy I can use,
Ain't got a reason or purpose,
I ain't got nothing but the blues.

The autotune hugged each line like a drunk friend insisting they're fine.

When trumpets bristle,
I try to whistle—
But nothing lifts off the ground.

Believe me, honey,
No light, no funny,
Since my ever-loving gladness skipped town.

He gave the mic stand a sentimental wobble, the kind that says "please collapse with me."

Ain't got a glow when I'm dreaming,
Ain't got a high I won't lose,
Ain't got a heart that is beaming,
I ain't got nothing but the blues.

The last note warbled like a dying star. Ethan bowed anyway.

"You're welcome, Nathan. Try topping *that* without divine intervention—or, you know, a functioning soul."

A bing-bong chimed through the air like a supermarket announcing **"Cleanup in Aisle Your Ego."**
The void parted. Out stepped the Reader's Voice, wearing the existential equivalent of a Hi-Vis vest.

Reader: "Dude. Really.
Enough with this Nathan comparison contest about

who's got the bigger··· blues catalog. We get it.
You're both mega-gifted, alright?"

The void flickered expectantly.

Reader: "O Lord! Ooooh, you're both so *big*! So *absolutely huge*!
Gosh, we're all really impressed down here, I can tell you."

The sarcasm hit the room like a custard pie delivered by divine decree.

Reader: "Now would you kindly—*for Graham Chapman's sake*—
get on with your own damn storyline?"

The void echoed, bing-bonged again out of spite, and the Reader vanished, leaving behind a faint smell of Monty Python and managerial disappointment.

Ethan shrugged with the air of a man folding up a circus tent after the lions union-walked out.

Ethan: "Oh well, I was done anyway. *Nondum matura est, nolo acerbam sumere.*"

A beat.
The void blinked like a confused goldfish.

Reader *(back again)*: "What's that?"

Ethan: "Nothing. Just praising back your girth too."

Reader: "…That sounded like Latin."

Ethan waved a hand, missed, tried again.

Ethan: "It was not. Was not. Assure you. I've got a cold. Makes me declension-ish."

He sniffed theatrically, as if grammar itself were contagious.

Later on.

The bar was one of those dim, forgettable cubes of wood and neon where dignity goes to hibernate. Ethan had just finished a sentence that clearly did

not belong in polite society—so, naturally, it belonged perfectly here.

The man across from him took a sip of his drink, processed Ethan's words, and promptly returned the sip back into his glass like a shocked espresso machine.

"You do *what*?"

Ethan, unfazed, poked the ice in his own glass like he was interrogating it.

Ethan: "I club puppy seals."

The man blinked. Twice. His soul briefly left his body to go fill out a complaint form.

"You club… seal *puppies*?"

Ethan: "No no no, totally different thing. I club puppy *S.E.A.L.s.*"

Silence.
A neuron fired somewhere in the man's brain and immediately regretted it.

"You club… puppies of *special forces*."

Ethan: "Indeed I do."

Now the man was fully glitching, like a corrupted NPC.

"How does—how do—what do—WHAT?"

Ethan leaned in, earnest in the way only a lunatic or a prophet can be.

Ethan: "I take them when they're young. Green. Recently signed into S.E.A.L. training."

The man mouthed a silent prayer to whoever was on shift in the celestial call center.

"And you club them… to *death*?"

Ethan: "Oh no no. Only into *reason*. Into quitting the idea that going somewhere to kill or be killed is a brilliant life plan. I club them into becoming brain surgeons. Or salumieri. Healthy, decent, peace-building individuals."

The man stared as if Ethan had declared he knits sweaters for volcanoes.

"…What… what clubs do you use?"

Ethan swirled his drink with monk-like serenity.

Ethan: "Oh, ask my caddy."

Ethan rested his elbows on the bar like a man preparing to launch a psychological torpedo.

Ethan: "Tell me—have you ever thought about the military as a career?"

His caddy, who absolutely should not have existed in a bar but did anyway, materialized at his side

holding a gleaming club like an angel of questionable competence.

Caddy: "Shall I provide an iron No. 2, Master Ethan?"

The other man—up to now merely confused—suddenly lit up like a Christmas tree finally plugged in.

He raised both hands.
Man: "I am an accountant, have never considered any other career, vote Democrat, advocate for gun control, and cannot even swim."

Ethan turned a single eyebrow toward Igor the Caddy.

Ethan: "Not now, Igor."

Then, to the man—

Ethan: "Figured you couldn't swim by myself, Mr. Brown."

The man froze.

Man: “How do you know my name is Brown?”

Ethan didn’t answer that. Instead, he smiled the smile of a man who shouldn’t smile and said:

Ethan: “May I treat you to another fried chicken and watermelon juice, Mr. Brown?”

The man blinked. Twice.
Man: “That is deeply and disturbingly racist. Also, you might very well—thank you very much.”

Ethan snapped his fingers; the bartender took the order with the air of someone who had stopped resisting reality years ago.

Then Ethan leaned in, locking eyes with Mr. Brown over the glow of the neon signs and the existential hum of the bar fridge.

Ethan: “So… really? Never considered any other career?”

Mr. Brown exhaled through his nose, the way a man does when he's about to confess something that tastes like cardboard.

Mr. Brown: "Have you ever seen that stupid movie *The Pursuit of Happyness*?"

Ethan: "Galactically dumb movie."

Mr. Brown: "Well… I'm what happens after the movie ends."

Ethan blinked. Slowly. Like he was buffering.

Ethan: "…Damn."

Igor the Caddy perked up, lifting a small, murderously polite putter with both hands like a ceremonial dagger.

Igor: "Shall I provide the coup-de-grâce putter, Master?"

Ethan and Mr. Brown both stared at the club.
Then at each other.
Then back at the club.
It hovered, implausibly shiny, thirsty for existential closure.

Mr. Brown thought about it. You could see the gears turning, smoking, threatening a union strike.
Then he shook his head.

Ethan sighed with the resignation of a man who ordered calamari and got therapy.

Ethan: "Not yet, Igor. But don't put the bag away."

Igor stood at attention, putter still raised, ready to bonk someone's life trajectory into a new orbit at a moment's notice.

The waiter approached like a man carrying diplomatic immunity on a tray.
He set the silver-domed cloche before Mr. Brown with the solemnity of a coronation.

The dome lifted.

And if you—yes *you*—have never grasped the pure, uncut, dictionary-definition meaning of "happiness," Mr. Brown's face in that instant was your Rosetta Stone. His soul opened like a time-lapse flower. Choir of calories in four-part harmony. Retina trembling.

Naturally, Igor snapped a photo.

Igor: "For posterity, Master."

The waiter cleared his throat in that delicate way waiters do when announcing something both exquisite and potentially lawsuit-generating.

Waiter: "The chef took the liberty of siding the chicken with fried okra, sautéed collard, and a Kool-Aid reduction… for you, sir."

Mr. Brown's left eyelid twitched.

Before he could speak, the sommelier swooped in with a snifter the size of a small aquarium. He poured in enough Hennessy to pickle a giraffe.

Sommelier: "Compliments of Mr. Ethan, sir."

Mr. Brown's lip quivered.

He was on the verge of tears—
15% for the galactic, high-definition racism on display
and 85% because the plate smelled like redemption, vacation, and choir practice at the same time.

The man was spiritually levitating.
Ethan toasted him with a mellow shrug, as if to say: *this is the least chaotic thing I've done all week.*

Ethan lifted his bourbon with the solemnity of a man christening a ship made entirely of bad decisions.

Ethan: "No accountant should go around content to *be* one without some cheer-me-up."

He clinked his glass against the air, because the air had earned it.

Then—because reality had clearly decided to escalate—the waiter swept back in, this time with the theatrical flourish of someone unveiling a royal transformation montage.

He draped an alabaster coat over Ethan's shoulders, smoothing it down like he was dressing a mafia snow angel.
Then came the matching jacket.
Then the careful adjustment of the watch chain on Ethan's vest—exactly the sort of chain that says *I both know the time and refuse to respect it.*
Then, finally, the pièce de résistance: a ludicrously huge white hat, the kind worn by men with opinions about bourbon purity, riverboats, and dueling rights.

A cane, carved and polished, was placed in Ethan's hand like a scepter.

The waiter bowed and departed without a word, as if this ritual had been foretold on ancient linen.

Igor stepped forward, reverent as a monk delivering scripture, and offered Ethan a rolled-up leather whip.

Ethan, without moving his lips more than a millimeter, waved it away.
A whisper—a conspiratorial breeze:

Ethan: "Not yet, Igor… not yet."

Igor nodded, understanding perfectly, because of course he did.

Somewhere in the bar, Mr. Brown took another bite of chicken and wondered if he'd died without noticing.

Igor glided to Mr. Brown's side carrying yet another tray, dome shining like a guilty conscience. He lifted it with flourish.

Inside:
Raw. Cotton. Balls.

Igor leaned in, voice soft as a villain's bedtime story.

Igor: "For you. Here. Pick some."

Mr. Brown made a noise best described as *existential whiplash*.
Before anyone could process the cosmic level of "nope" happening at that table—

BING-BONG

The void yawned open again like an annoyed automatic door, and the Reader's Voice stepped out, arms crossed, eyes narrowed, energy reading "I have absolutely had it."

Reader: "Okay. Nope. This has gone too far already, even for me. I draw the line *here*. You can go back to the Nathan-size-comparison nonsense, but *this* ends here."

Ethan looked genuinely baffled—rare, but not impossible.

Ethan: "For *this*? Come on, this is homeopathic racism. I'll do much worse along my narrative."

Reader: "Oh yeah? Well, that better happen while I'm *sleeping*, not while I'm *reading*."

Ethan: "That doesn't make any sense."

Reader: "Well… *you* don't make any sense."

Mr. Brown raised a timid hand.

Mr. Brown: "Nothing in this makes sense."

Igor placed a gentle, solemn hand on his shoulder, like a therapist with a questionable license.

Igor: "Shhh… there there… here, pick some cotton."

Mr. Brown stared at the cotton. The cotton stared back.

Somewhere in the universe, a moral compass spun so fast it unscrewed itself and flew into the sun.

This time the bing-bong didn't just upgrade—
it **went full monarchy**.

The air quivered, then:

DING—DONG—DANG—DING—DONG—DANG—DING—DONG.

Not a supermarket.
Not a void.
Big Ben himself kicked the door in.

And then *I* stepped out—Alba Pratalia, yes, me, the authoress, in first person, in the flesh, materializing right into the middle of this derailed circus—wearing a British Army No. 2 Dress uniform so sharply pressed it could commit minor assault.

I planted my boots, hands behind my back like a captain inspecting troops who have done everything wrong since sunrise.

Pratalia (me): "Silly, silly, silly. We did this already. We *did* the racist bit and the plantation-coronel aesthetic in *Pick pick pick*. The Igor character is obviously Giuda from *Venerdì 12*, Leo Ortolani era. And calling him Igor—Ethan, please—straight from *Young Frankenstein*?"
I pointed at him.
"Ethan! You have no fantasy."

He pointed right back at me, wounded theatrically.

Ethan: "Me?"

Pratalia: "A character is the author's mirror."

Ethan squinted, tilted his head, and let the punchline drop like a bowling ball falling off a shelf.

Ethan: "Oh, yes. The little sloth bitch."

I nodded, accepting this as if it were a military commendation.

Pratalia: "Precisely. So, from now on, try and be original."

Ethan blinked. Twice.

Ethan: "Me? That makes no sense."

I leaned forward, finger at his forehead like I was booping a misbehaving kitten.

Pratalia: "Oh yeah? Well… *you* don't make any sense."

And with that, the Big Ben chime reversed itself—
DONG—DING—DANG—DONG—DING—DANG—DONG—DING—
rewinding the universe like a VHS tape being bullied.

I dissolved back behind the writing board, uniform and all, leaving a faint smell of tea, ink, and narrative authority.

Back to you, boys.

Ethan exhaled like a man who had just watched his own creator descend from the heavens to insult him in person and then leave without paying the bill.

Ethan: "Well… Igor, bring the whip."

Igor, ever the butler of questionable implication, stepped forward holding a silver tray with the rolled-up leather whip displayed on it like a Michelin-star dessert.

The waiter immediately swooped in for a wardrobe correction, clearly under strict instructions from Narrative HR.

He plucked off the plantation-coronel ensemble with professional disgust, folded it with the precision of a man erasing evidence, and then—quick as a sleight-of-hand card trick—helped Ethan into a leather jacket and a brown fedora.

Suddenly Ethan wasn't a plantation owner—
he was an adventure professor who drinks too much and should not be trusted around caves.

Ethan took the whip, weighed it in his hand like he expected it to whisper secrets, then snapped his wrist.

CRACK.

The sound echoed through the bar like a time-travel punch.

Mr. Brown froze.
His ancestors collectively stood up inside his DNA.
He very efficiently—**very**—reached for the cotton balls on the tray and gathered them like they were unpaid invoices.

Ethan snapped the whip again—more confidently this time.

Ethan: "Mr. Brown, let's go."

Mr. Brown adjusted his glasses, pure accountant mode activated.

Mr. Brown: "Would the whip be deductible?"

The silence that followed had the texture of a raised eyebrow.

Ethan tucked the whip at his side like a man who absolutely should not own one.

"Depends," he said, "on whether this counts as professional development."

And so it came to pass that the *crusade army*—a term used here with the imaginative generosity of a drunk poet—set off toward unexplored shores:
Ethan in his knockoff-archaeologist drip,
Igor with his silver tray of narrative hazards,
and Mr. Brown clutching cotton balls and a Hennessy-induced sense of destiny.

A soundtrack rose from nowhere:
"Ethan Ethan, León León León—"

whistle
BONG from a bass drum large enough to have its own ZIP code.

They marched like three men who had absolutely no idea where they were going and even less idea why.

From the void—no bing-bong, no courtesy chime, just raw exasperation—my voice (Pratalia) cut in:

Pratalia: "Ethan, for—look, I'm telling you—
1966, Mario Monicelli, *L'armata Brancaleone*.
You're doing a full reenactment, you clown."

Ethan pretended not to hear me.
Which is impressive, considering I literally exist inside his narrative bloodstream.

He raised the whip like he had tenure in chaos.

Ethan: "Forward, my braves! Forward! *Adelante! Si pueden… con juicio.*"

Igor nodded solemnly, Mr. Brown adjusted his accountant tie, and the three of them trudged off toward whatever nightmare I would have to fix later.

Somewhere, Monicelli sighed in his grave.

ETHAN'S THIRD

The demijohn gurgled like a tipsy oracle. Ethan squeezed the rubber tube between two fingers, siphoning another dark, fruity splash into both glasses with the solemnity of a priest refueling the Eucharist. Mr Brown, who did not trust liquids that came in *wicker baskets*, watched the stream with the cautious reverence of a man observing an unfamiliar animal.

Ethan took a long pull, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, and leaned in with the posture of someone about to drop a thesis nobody asked for.

"Have you seen how they eat?" he said. "They put bowls in the middle of the table—salad, pasta, meat, bread—and then just… graze. Like free-range humans. They put salad and green beans and

spaghetti on the same plate. As if that combination wasn't declared a war crime at Geneva."

Mr Brown, softly, as if afraid to disturb the divinity of the tablecloth: "That's how we do it at home."

Ethan nodded sagely, which in his case meant he didn't hear a single decibel of that.

"And they have **milk** with it. Milk. With spaghetti."

Mr Brown barely above sea level: "Milk is healthy…"

Ethan ignored him with the intensity of a man swerving a moral obligation. He raised a finger in proclamation.

"There are things," he said, "that are grounds for… The SNIF."

Mr Brown's eyebrows went up like he just heard a jingle promising 20% off detergent *and* eternal

salvation.

"The SNIF?"

Ethan turned theatrical. Arms wide. Eyes blazing. A Barbera-fueled prophet.

"In 1972," he began, "a crack *culinary* commando unit of Italian grandmothers was exiled from their parish kitchens by a culinary tribunal for a crime they absolutely **did** commit: assault with a deadly rolling pin on a man who put cream in carbonara."

Mr Brown blinked. Ethan continued.

"These nonne promptly *escaped* from a maximum-security retirement home to the underground trattorie of Naples.

Today, still wanted by the Ministry of Tourism for 'excessive authenticity enforcement,' they survive as **cooks of justice** and **soldiers of fortune cookies**—which they despise, by the way."

He leaned close. Mr Brown leaned back, as one does when history becomes a conspiracy.

“If you have a problem…
If someone is breaking spaghetti to ‘make it fit the pot’…
If your roommate tries making lasagna with *cheddar*…
And if you can find them—”

Ethan snapped his fingers dramatically.

“…maybe you can hire **THE S.N.I.F.**
The Special Nonne Intervention Force.”

The demijohn burbled approvingly.

Mr Brown looked at his glass, then at Ethan, then back at his glass.

“Do they… do they work international cases?”

“Oh absolutely,” Ethan said. “They have diplomatic immunity from the Vatican. Long story. Involves a

bishop, a polenta accident, and one extremely frightened alpaca."

Ethan swirled his glass like a man reviewing battlefield footage.
"You should've *seen* the nonnas," he said, voice dropping to that reverent register people reserve for miracles and tax fraud.

"They didn't *arrive* in the dining room. They **materialised**. Air ripples, light bends, tablecloth does a gentle whoosh like it's welcoming Death in an apron."

Mr Brown swallowed. Not the wine—his dignity.

Ethan pressed on.

"You know De Niro in *The Untouchables*, right? The baseball bat scene? Same energy. Same stance. Same cosmic inevitability. Except swap De Niro for three elderly women with orthopedic shoes… and

swap the bat for rolling pins with the density of collapsed stars."

He raised a hand: the catalogue of carnage.

"Family father?"

BAM.

Rolling pin to the dome. Cranium hits the table like a cracked coconut. Brain matter decorates the salad—now with 100% more authenticity than their cooking ever had.

"Mother?"

BAM.

Her skull goes Jackson Pollock across the wallpaper. The nonnas do not blink. They haven't blinked since 1954.

"Kid n.1?"

BAM.

Full force. The kind of strike that says *'your taste sins echo through generations.'*

“Kid n.2?”

Ethan paused, respectful.

“…mini-BAM. Because she was little. They don’t overdo it. They’re professionals.”

Mr Brown stared at his glass like it suddenly contained the secret of mortality.

Ethan topped him up.

“And that,” he said, “is why you NEVER mix salad with spaghetti. Not because it’s wrong. Because somewhere, in the ether, a nonna is listening… and warming up her rolling pin.”

Brown went pale as Barbera left too long in the sun.

“I should really call my family,” he muttered, fumbling for his phone. “They might be having green beans with mac and chee—”

Ethan’s head snapped up like a wolf smelling heresy.

“Mac *what*?”

Brown's pupils dilated. "Oh no, no, no, I meant—McBurger and cheese. You know. Classic. Totally classic. Very normal. Nobody's melting cheddar on pasta in my home, no sir—"

Ethan didn't answer.
He simply pressed a button under the table.

The wall behind them unfolded like a Bond villain's mood board, revealing a **mega-screen** big enough to shame a small cinema. It flickered on.

There they were.
Brown's wife. His son. His daughter. A wholesome little domestic tableau.
Sitting at the table.
Scooping forkfuls of—

Ethan squinted.
"…is that Kraft powder?"

Brown whimpered. “They must have found the emergency box in the pantry—”

And then—

PUFF.

A displacement of air.
Curtains rustling.
A ripple of lace and righteous fury.

Three nonne materialised *behind* the Brown family, aprons fluttering like war banners.

Brown: “Noooooooo—!”

The nonne didn’t even give him time to inhale his grief.

BANG.
Rolling pin to the wife. Skull pops like a champagne celebration nobody wanted.

BONG.

The son gets it next; vertebrae shuffle like dropped Jenga pieces.

BUNG.

The daughter's head meets the oak table with the soft, final thud of a watermelon that knew this day would come.

Bones crack.

Brains spill.

Silence settles.

Dinner is··· concluded.

The screen flicked to black.

Ethan took a sip of wine, calm as a surgeon who's done this procedure before.

"It was already too late for them," he said.

"Mac and cheese··· they were dead already."

Brown collapsed into sobs, face buried in his hands.

“My family…”

Ethan patted his shoulder with all the tenderness of a man swatting dust off a jacket.

“Better this way. Quick and clean.”

He poured another glass.
For Brown.
For the fallen.
For the nonne.

The demijohn gurgled in agreement.

Igor glided in like a butler who moonlights as an executioner.
A silver tray shimmered under the lights—three tiny glasses and a squat bottle of grappa so strong it could degrease an engine.

“Should I serve the rejoicing grappa, master?” he asked, bowing with that elegant menace only Igor could pull off.

Ethan nodded, benevolent in the way only men with no conscience can be.
"You may, Igor. You may. Both Brown and me."

Igor poured.
The fumes alone could baptize a corpse.

Brown stared at his glass as if it were a loaded gun with forgiveness engraved on the barrel.

"...Igor," he croaked, voice shaking, "please bring the coup de grâce putter and send me with my family."

Igor paused, one eyebrow rising like a guillotine.

Ethan chuckled.
"Nonsense, Brown. We have plenty to do."

He leaned closer, voice low, matter-of-fact, the way people announce a weather forecast or a long prison sentence.

“Also… those whose family raped the concept of pasta deserve to carry the pain of having seen their family’s skulls shattered in front of them.”
He shrugged. “It’s just right.”

Igor, loyal disciple of chaotic culinary justice, nodded.
“Just right.”

Brown sniffled into his grappa.

Ethan raised his glass.

“To repentance. And to digesting your trauma without cheese sauce.”

Igor clinked.
Brown trembled.
The grappa burned like holy fire.

Outside, somewhere in the night, a rolling pin hummed approval.

Brown collapsed into himself like a folding chair in a hurricane, sobbing into the checkered tablecloth.

“My family… my family… they killed—my family got **rolling-pinned** by a gang of Italian grandmothers…”

The words hit the air like wet laundry; limp, tragic, and slightly absurd.

Ethan clapped him on the back with all the finesse of a forklift.

“Cheer up, Brown! You know what they say: death is but a passage.”

He cleared his throat and declaimed, with the gravitas of a poet performing in a hardware store:

“Death will come and will bear your eyes –
this death of ours, escorting us
from morning until dusk, restless,
deaf, like an old regret

or an unreasonable vice. Your eyes
will be a vain word,
a silent cry, a silence."

He ended the recital by sipping grappa in the most unpoetic way possible.

Igor stepped in, hands folded, expression of mild cosmic boredom.

"Cheer up then, Brown. Worse things happen at sea, you know."
He tilted his head.
"I mean, what've you got to lose? You know, you come from nothing, you're going back to nothing. What have you lost? Nothing!"

Brown lifted his face, blotchy and streaming.
"My family. I lost my family."

Igor smiled patiently, like a teacher explaining basic addition to a stubborn child.

“Cheer up, you old bugger. Come on. Give us a grin.”

Brown’s face twisted into pure existential despair.
He fell to his knees, hands covering his face,
weeping loud enough to make the demijohn vibrate.

Ethan watched him, exhaled, and shrugged.

“Some of us have got to live as well, you know.”

Igor nodded approvingly.
The grappa nodded metaphorically.

Brown cried harder.

NATHAN'S FOURTH

RECEPTIONIST: Yes, sir.

MR BROWN: I'd like to die, please.

RECEPTIONIST: Certainly, sir. Have you been here before?

MR BROWN: No, this is my first time.

RECEPTIONIST: Reason for terminating life?

MR BROWN: My family has been massacred. With rolling pins… by old ladies… but anyway, I'd like to join them.

RECEPTIONIST: I see. Let me check… hmm… Mr. Dubakey is free, but he's a little *mourny*. Yes, try Mr. Barnard, room twelve.

Brown trudges down a sterile corridor that smells faintly of bleach and misplaced hope. He reaches a door.

Plaque:

12

Termination of Life

Mr. Barnard, Esq.

Brown opens the door.

MR BROWN: Is this the right room for death?

MR. BARNARD: I've told you once.

MR BROWN: No you haven't.

MR. BARNARD: [Deliberate] Yes I have.

MR BROWN: *When?*

MR. BARNARD: Just now.

MR BROWN: No you didn't.

MR. BARNARD: Yes I did.

MR BROWN: Didn't.

MR. BARNARD: I did!

MR BROWN: Didn't!

MR. BARNARD: I'm telling you I did.

MR BROWN: You did not!

MR. BARNARD: Oh, sorry—was this a five-minute argument or the full half-hour?

MR BROWN: Argument? I came here to die.

MR. BARNARD: You did not.

MR BROWN: Yes I did.

MR. BARNARD: You did not.

MR BROWN: Yes I did.

MR. BARNARD: Didn't.

MR BROWN: Yes I did.

MR. BARNARD: *[Annoyed.]* Didn't!

MR BROWN: Yes I did…. Look, this is an argument, not death.

MR. BARNARD: Yes it is.

MR BROWN: No it isn't. It's actually just contradiction.

MR. BARNARD: No it isn't.

MR BROWN: Yes it is.

MR. BARNARD: It is not!

MR BROWN: It *is*! You just contradicted me!

MR. BARNARD: No I didn't!

MR BROWN: Oh you *did*!

MR. BARNARD: No no no no no no no—

MR BROWN: You did! Just then!

MR. BARNARD: No, no. Non– nonsense.

MR BROWN: Oh look, this is futile.

MR. BARNARD: No it isn't.

MR BROWN: I came here to terminate my life.

MR. BARNARD: No you didn't. You came here for an argument.

MR BROWN: This is not even an argument, it is merely contradiction.

MR. BARNARD: No it isn't.

MR BROWN: Yes it is.

MR. BARNARD: Not at all.

MR BROWN: Now look—

MR. BARNARD: *[Dinging a bell]* Thank you! Morning!

MR BROWN: What?

MR. BARNARD: *[Cheerful]* That's it. Minutes are over. Morning!

MR BROWN: I don't care about your minutes, I want to die!

MR. BARNARD: Sorry. The five minutes is up.

MR BROWN: That was never five minutes just now. And anyway, I don't care. I want to end my biological processes. Now!

Ethan steps in like a man entering a thrift store looking for trouble.

ETHAN: See? Told ya it wasn't so easy.

MR. BARNARD: Yes it is.

MR BROWN: I just wanted to be nowhere with my family instead of here without them.

MR. BARNARD: No you didn't.

ETHAN: Oh, *enough* already.

And then—because bureaucratic eternity demands escalation—Igor oozes into existence behind

Barnard, holding a Peugeot 208 jack like a medieval relic stolen from a very confused mechanic.

CRACK.

Not a dainty crack. Not an apologetic crack.
A **Trotsky-special**, skull accepting metal the way spreadsheets accept misery: deeply, efficiently, and with textbook penetration.

Barnard freezes mid-contradiction, eyes doing the goldfish farewell tour, then slumps forward like a government form finally approved.

Igor wipes the jack on Barnard's blazer with the solemn professionalism of someone cleaning a very fancy spatula.

IGOR: Sir, should I book him for "completed procedure," or "customer satisfaction guaranteed"?

Ethan shrugs. Brown blinks.
The receptionist—somewhere down the hall—
stamps a form without looking up.

And the universe continues, slightly more concussed than before.

Brown: "Where's Igor?"

Igor: *POOF.*

A bar counter materialized.

Igor materialized the way only Igor could:
by detonating vertically from behind the counter
like a Soviet toaster under emotional distress.

He landed in full barman regalia — crisp vest, immaculate shirt, and the trademark towel over his shoulder: "Have I been summoned? What can I get you, sir?"

Brown flinched so hard his soul left his body and re-entered reluctantly.

Brown: “Oooh… eeeh… well, surprise me.”

Igor leaned in with the theatrical gravitas of a Shakespearean butler about to deliver news of a duel.

Igor: “Nancy Reagan liked anal.”

Brown: “Whaaaat?”

Igor: “See — you’re surprised.”

Brown’s brain made dial-up noises.

Brown: “…”

Igor: “A cocktail, perhaps?”

Brown: “Indeed.”

Without even bending, Igor produced a fully made cocktail from under the counter like a magician with questionable ethics.

Brown: “How did you—?”

Igor lifted one eyebrow, the canonical *classy barman explanation look*.

Igor: "Two parts Hennessy, one part Kool-Aid, splash of grape soda, on the rocks of frozen watermelon cubes."

Brown inspected the drink, the way one inspects a bomb with unclear wiring.

Brown: "This is racist at a level so beyond reason that I tend to like it."

Igor nodded as if congratulated on a tax return he forged flawlessly.

Then — *flick!* — with an elegant gesture he produced a tiny plate of snacks.

Igor: "A side of cornbread chips, perhaps?"

Brown gasped. "This is getting so good to be true."

Igor — never one to leave a joke without committing arson to it — slid a tray of raw cotton balls across the counter.

Igor: "Here, Brown, pick some cotton."

Brown, by now delirious with shock and alcohol, picked up a handful. Something ancient and bluesy ignited in him like a rusty engine rolling back to life.

And he started singing, voice trembling, soul cracking open like cheap plaster:

Brown (singing):
"*Dat nigga from Shiloh*
Kin pick a bale o' cotton,
Dat nigga from Shiloh
Kin pick a bale a day…"

The saloon went quiet.

Even the piano froze, one note hanging in the air like it was too stunned to fall.

Ethan, of course, didn't blink — just leaned on the counter, Old Fashioned in hand, as if this were simply episode twelve of whatever cosmic sitcom he lived inside.

And Igor wiped the counter with his towel, proud as a man who had just summoned the exact chaos he intended.

ETHAN'S FIFTH

The saloon was the kind of place where wood went to die.
San Francisco, or whatever godforsaken imitation of it existed after 11 p.m., baked in whisky fumes and bad decisions. The piano in the corner looked like it had PTSD. The bartender had definitely stopped caring around 1986.

Ethan, meanwhile, was conducting a private demolition derby with a row of Old Fashioneds.

He wasn't drinking them.
He was *evicting* them from existence.

Mr Brown, four seats away — because Ethan at close range was medically inadvisable — was holding his own glass as if it were Sura 112, whispering internal pleas for metaphysical refunds. The poor bastard looked like sorrow had decided to sublet him.

Ethan noticed. Ethan always noticed, like a hungry hawk in human disguise.

Ethan: "So you are in pain."

Brown: "Oh god…"

Ethan: "You're grieving."

Brown: "My family… my family…"

Ethan: "You're unset, turned inside out, gutted and folded, nowhere to see wellness or peace, out of breath, no taste, no energy, no meaning."

Brown made a soft, strangled noise — one of those religious exhalations reserved for childbirth and extreme customer service.

Brown: "Christ… Holy Virgin Mary help me… I can't take it anymore."

Ethan: "Okay. Now imagine feeling like that without any reason at all. Just random. No grief, no tragedy, no loss. One wakes up and feels like that."

Brown's head jerked up.
A man glimpsing a new species in his own kitchen.

Brown: "…Oh."

Ethan nodded with the tragic gravitas of a man who won three Nobel Prizes in Suffering but never bothered to pick them up.

Ethan: "Indeed. And it is all the time a surprise, coming up and down, stronger or weaker — like it's got its own timetable and doesn't tell you. Very rude, honestly."

Brown blinked slowly, the gears turning for the first time since his emotional collapse.

Brown: "I can relate to that."

Ethan: "Right. And also — you feel guilty about it. Guilty for feeling like that."

Brown: "Oh, I respect that."

There it was.
The sacred union of two idiots discovering existential kinship over overpriced bourbon.

Brown lifted the glass with the solemnity of a condemned man and dropped the entire Old Fashioned down the hatch. Hand shot up, signaling the bartender for another, like a flag raised at a tragic Olympics.

Ethan grinned at him sideways — the grin that said *welcome to the abyss, we have snacks*.

Ethan: "Attaboy."

Brown, now two drinks deeper and one emotional breakdown lighter, stared at his glass as if waiting for it to wink back.

Brown: "So you're a mess from before, eh?"

Ethan didn't even look up. He just gave a tiny nod, the kind that somehow carried the entire history of human despair and at least three failed marriages.

Ethan: "Since soon after the invention of the wheel."

Brown squinted. "Like… the literal wheel?"

Ethan: "Oh yeah. They rolled that thing out and I immediately thought, *'Great. Now we can run away from our problems faster.'* And that was that."

Brown blinked, let that existential archaeology settle, then took another mouthful of his newly arrived Old Fashioned.

A soft sigh left him — weirdly serene, like a monk who'd decided to renounce earthly attachments by accident.

Brown: "I feel now… a bit… it's irrational but… a little better."

Ethan: "Eh…"

Brown: "Well… not better, but… towards content."

Ethan tilted his head in that very Ethan way — the kind that said: *I refuse to say something encouraging but I acknowledge your attempt at not collapsing.*

Ethan: "Hmm-mm."

Brown frowned, genuinely puzzled.

Brown: "What is this?"

Ethan swirled his drink, as if conjuring a tiny storm of citrus-scented philosophy.

Ethan: "It's the doom that every happy man is happy in his own way, but miserable men are miserable all alike."

Brown blinked. Frowned.
Pointed his finger vaguely upwards, like a man trying to catch a memory before it ran off.

Brown: "I've already heard that."

Ethan nodded, deadpan.

Ethan: "Yeah, it's the reverse-Tolstoy theorem. The principle of the Multiple Miserable Kareninas."

Brown stared at him.

Then, slow as a sunrise, the corner of his mouth twitched.

A laugh almost escaped — a desperate, exhausted, "screw it" sort of laugh — but he swallowed it back into the whiskey, where it belonged.

The piano in the corner produced a single accidental note, as if agreeing.

And the night went on, the saloon breathing around them like an old animal resigned to hosting yet another human catastrophe.

ETHAN'S SIXTH

Ethan and Brown leaned against the counter like two drunks auditioning for the role of "Structural Failure." Igor polished an invisible glass with the commitment of a monk polishing divine relics, except holier and with less paperwork.

Brown, already in advanced slurry mode, dropped his head sideways like a parrot trying to remember the alphabet.

Brown: "Two blacks ride in the backseat of a car. Who's driving?"

Ethan: "Dunno."

Brown: "The cop."

Ethan: "Good. Very good."
He nodded with the serene approval of a man who had finally found something in the universe that made sense.

Igor slid in, smooth as a tax audit.

Igor: "Olive or onion?"

Brown: "What?"

Ethan: "In your martini."

Brown: "Dunno. Never had a martini in my life."

Ethan: "Go for the onion. Gibson-start."

Brown: "I don't know what that means, but ok. What's the difference between a black and a wheel?"

Ethan: "Dunno."

Brown: "When you put the chains on a wheel it doesn't start singing the blues."

Ethan inhaled sharply.
Ethan: "Oooooh! Really good. Really good indeed."

Igor set down the martinis with that grand ceremonial precision usually reserved for coronations and public executions. Brown's glass

had its lonely pickled onion skewered like a gladiator. Ethan's: stark and ungarnished, the drink equivalent of a tax form.

Brown: "And you? No onion nor olive?"

Ethan: "I think the garnish takes the volume that could be occupied by the martini."

Brown: "Oh. Good thinking. Let me try mine."

He sipped.

He tied.

He retched.

He coughed.

He briefly saw the face of a god he didn't believe in and wished he didn't.

Brown: "Dear *god*, you can fuel a car with this."

Ethan: "It's an acquired taste."

Brown (coughing again): “I feel I should take in four strokes now. And I suddenly understand the Carnot cycle.”

Then he leaned in, conspiratorial, eyes shining with that particular light that only appears when six neurons form an alliance.

Brown: “Anyway… what are the five things the black has?”

Ethan and Igor froze like two deer caught in the headlights of a racist quiz.

They looked at each other. Thought. Thought harder. Somewhere, faintly, a kettle boiled.

Igor: “White of eyes.”

Brown raised one finger.

Ethan: “Teeth.”

Second finger.

Igor: "Palms of hands. Oh— and of feet."

Two more fingers. Four total. Brown's face displayed the smug satisfaction of a man who had *trained* for this moment.

Ethan and Igor, meanwhile, were experiencing emotional whiplash. Their brains hit every possible synonym for "confused" all at once: flustered, thrown off, wrong-footed, baffled, bewildered, puzzled, stunned, taken aback, nonplussed, unsettled, disoriented, fazed, rattled, blindsided, thrown for a loop, out of their depth, at a loss, wrong-sided, shaken, knocked sideways—

They briefly consulted the thesaurus under the table, high-fived, and continued being psychologically concussed.

Brown: "And the owner."

He lifted a triumphant fifth finger.

Silence.

Then—

Ethan and Igor rose to their feet like two priests witnessing a miracle they absolutely should not endorse.

They applauded.
They applauded with the gravity of men clapping at the moon landing.
Roses rained from an audience that did not exist.
Spotlights materialized out of sheer narrative will.
A single trumpet played a confused fanfare.

Narrator (with a cigarette): "And thus, Brown earned his place in the annals of the bar's unofficial Vatican of Awful Jokes. Amen— or whatever."

ETHAN'S SEVENTH

And on the seventh day, unlike the little ghost in the sky that doesn't exist and definitely doesn't manage HR for the universe, Ethan did **not** rest.

He woke up with the moral energy of an uncharged phone, watched some porn with the same enthusiasm one reserves for tax tutorials, masturbated out of inertia, ejaculated like a bored sprinkler, didn't clean because "future-me can handle that," and staggered to the kitchen for a Laphroaig that tasted like a burning hospital bed in a peat bog.

He drank himself into a sleep shaped like a crime scene outline.

Woke up.

Had a panic attack so sudden it might as well have worn sirens.

Drank more to bully it back into whatever dark cupboard panic attacks crawl out of.

Watched more porn without coaxing even the suggestion of an erection — like a man browsing museum catalogues of statues he'll never touch.

Then, entirely out of spite toward his own brain, finished the day reading *Don Quijote,* muttering "same, bro" every time the knight made a bad decision.

Igor went to the beach to puncture children's inflatable balls with a sharpened metal straw, leaving behind a trail of disappointed toddlers and confused parents who suspected "European behavior."

Brown gently wept in the bar's storage room, hugging a crate of onions not because they made him cry, but because at least the onions had an excuse.

And thus the seventh day passed, immaculate, sanctified, and absolutely unfit for liturgical calendars.